

**Submission
No 56**

**INQUIRY INTO RATIONALE FOR, AND IMPACTS OF,
NEW DAMS AND OTHER WATER INFRASTRUCTURE IN
NSW**

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I, Ivan Kokotovic am currently operating within a Western Sydney LGA (Liverpool CC), as a planning professional of 15 years, having previously completed my Master of Urban and Regional Planning (MURP) at the University of Sydney.

Combined Response to Terms of Reference (TOF);

The announcement of Federal and State Funding for some of the projects named in the TOF were made in October 2019 in the after-glow of state and federal election victories of the announcing party leaders, during yet another debilitating drought throughout regional NSW (which since 2000 has been drought free approximately 6 years), and in the face of the looming unprecedented bush-fire season which had already started in parts of Australia and which was forecast and proved to be the worst in Australia's collective memory since European settlement.

The need for some of the projects seems to be based upon recommendations from Water NSW which is entirely reasonable, and was flagged in the 'NSW Regional Water Statement' issued by NSW Department of Industry (DPI) in February 2019. However, the fast-tracking of the projects which focus on the benefits of economic and social outcomes in regional areas also often bypasses the scrutiny usually required relating to ecological and environmental impact assessments, which would usually accompany such large scale developments.

The concern of these recent decisions in the historical context is that they seem at odds with the frameworks and mechanisms agreed to in the Murray-Darling Plan in 2012, which acknowledged that 'drought proofing' agricultural regional areas of Australia is no longer feasible and is 19th and 20th Century thinking. This was a considered approach agreed to across the Commonwealth with the understanding that climate change was altering rain-fall patterns and was contributing to longer and more severe drought events, and required a change to how water allocation for irrigation, in particular, should be brought back into natural environmental processes, to provide some semblance of equilibrium to the river systems and their eco-systems. The recent dam announcements and decisions replace 'drought proofing' language with the terms 'drought resilience', and as such similarly acknowledge that droughts are no longer considered natural disasters which can be overcome, but must be endured. Even so, the proposed infrastructure (19th and 20th Century) seems at odds with how the Murray-Darling Basin Authority characterises the risks of reducing waterflow in the system, that being;

- increased salinity
- outbreaks of algae
- loss of native animals due to destruction of breeding spots and food sources
- loss of vegetation, like River Red gums and grasses, which affects water quality and native animals looking for food and shelter.

The additional concern, is that there has been a systematic failure over the last 8 years in how water has been distributed between the states for agricultural purposes, and when it should be released into the river systems and wetlands to reduce environmental impact. Working new and increased dam catchments into an already failing water-sharing arrangement may serve only to increase the amount of water supplied and made available to water users and communities, while reducing the amount available within the natural environment.

Summary of comments in a changing environment:

- the economic rationale and business case of the projects is obvious, and is a consistent message from the current government which seeks to stimulate the economy (however temporarily), through the provision of jobs in regional areas, which helps stimulate local businesses through additional temporary working

populations based in regional towns. Although this type of approach could be considered reactionary, it is often in response to previous government and agency inaction in providing appropriate infrastructure solutions. This is increasingly obvious in a COVID affected economy.

Long-term the business case is based upon the continuing agricultural activities in increasingly climate affected/drought prone areas. Such activities in many cases may still be considered water inefficient due to highly water dependent crops in drought impacted areas. In this instance the business case is less attractive, given that investing in alternative farming techniques using new technologies, may be a better approach in terms of securing water both for commercial and community use, and to ensure water flow within the natural environment.

Weighing-up the environmental damage of these infrastructure programs should be key to considering their usefulness in the changing climate where water is becoming more scarce, because of the damage lack of water in certain areas could have to water-tables, soil structure, and ecosystems. It is unsure if the need to secure water in this way is linked to any proposed intensification of agricultural use in the relevant areas or any significant increase in community population to supply water to. If a logical correlation is not made to this effect, it can only be assumed that the increased water storage is purely a response to the changing climate and less and less rain events. Rather than adapting to the way water is used (with new technologies) or altering some of those uses in response to the changing climate, it seems the likely results of the dam water infrastructure, will allow these inefficient practices to continue, while increasing the lack of water flow into already significantly impacted natural ecological processes.

Therefore it makes the case even more obvious, that without a thorough and transparent environmental assessment of the infrastructure, it would remain unclear how their operation would affect inland waterways, and how any impact aligns (or does not align) to any national and state water agreements and international environmental obligations, or whether any alternative solutions to water security had been reasonably explored.